

SENTINEL

A Russian Enigma.
The Hon. Mrs. Athol Forbes, in Good Words

When Catherine II. of Russia made her bold stroke for the throne in 1762, her chief advisers and abettors were the Counts Gregory and Alexis Orlov, who consequently became equal participants of her favors. Gregory, the elder, was empty headed but exceedingly handsome; Alexis was masterful, sensual and of an energetic, restless temperament, which was evidently inherited from their father, a Strelitz named Ivan, surnamed Orel, which signifies an eagle. He, with hundreds of others, had been condemned to death by Peter the Great after the rebellion at Moscow in 1698, and owed his life to the perfect sangfroid he exhibited when, finding the portion of the beam which served as the block for whole ranks encumbered with the head of one of his companions, he kicked it away, saying, "This is my place; it must be clear." This act, which was witnessed by the Emperor, roused his admiration; he granted him a pardon forthwith, and placed him in a regiment of the line, where he so distinguished himself that he acquired the rank of officer, and consequently the title of noble, which remained in the family.

The ambition to divest Russia of its Oriental character and to introduce European manners and customs, initiated by Peter, was carried out to the letter by Catherine, who taught her courtiers to feel and enjoy the fascinations of French life, while at the same time she had the wit to make her subjects forget her German extraction by selecting her ministers entirely from the people. The principal of these were Gregory Orlov, Galatin, Potemkin, Romantsov and Panin. * * * Adventurers and adventuresses sprang up like mushrooms. One of these was a lady who claimed to be the daughter of the Empress Elizabeth, and therefore the rightful heir to the throne. Her career, not entirely unblemished one, and the manner in which she was entrapped by Count Alexis Orlov, was one of the sensations of the day.

Before relating her story, however, it is necessary to record the positions held by the two brothers at Court. Gregory remained at Catherine's right hand, invested with the title of Prince, having apartments in the royal palace, with communication to Catherine's private rooms by means of sliding panels in the walls; while it fell to Alexis to guard her half foolish husband Peter III., and, in concert with his fellow officers, Leplov and Feodor Bariatinski, to put an end to his life, which is said to have been done in a most barbarous manner in the castle of Ropcha, though whether or not with the Empress's sanction has never transpired. Count Alexis was then about twenty-six years of age, and is described as being remarkable for his "immense height, athletic form, muscular power, and surprising agility." An enormous gash which he had received in the face during a quarrel had not completely effaced the primitive beauty of his features." Such a man, then, was the second favorite, who was given the rank of Lieutenant General, with the order of St. Andrew, the highest in the empire, and in addition to this the key as chamberlain, with right of entry to the Empress's rooms at any hour of the day or night.

The war with Turkey, which then broke out, furnished him with an opportunity of justifying this extraordinary promotion, and of which he promptly availed himself by submitting a plan for a naval expedition to the Archipelago, and obtaining the command, with Admiral John Elphinstone and Captain Greig as chief officers; the latter afterwards becoming Admiral in his place. By an arrangement with the Archduke of Tuscany, Leghorn was made the headquarters of the fleet, and at the desire of the Empress the British there, Sir John Dick, with the permission of King George III., was appointed Russian agent, but in a private capacity, receiving in 1770, as an acknowledgement of his services, the order of St. Anne set round with diamonds, with a letter from Count Panin conveying the thanks of her Imperial Majesty and her Ministers.

When Count Alexis had occasion to be at Leghorn he resided chiefly with St. John, but he had also a residence at Pisa, where he spent the intervals in the campaign, during one of which he signaled himself to the horror and disgust of the inhabitants, by his execution of the poetess, Madeline Morelli, soon after she had been crowned with laurel at the Capitol in 1771. It was shortly after this event that the mysterious lady already alluded to first appeared on the scenes. Although the bearer of many names, to the end she remained nameless. Born no one knows where, educated no one knows how, yet the mistress of several languages, she first became known to the public in London, where she lived in great style in company with certain Van Toers, the son of a Dutch merchant at Ghent, from which place he had fled, leaving wife, children, and creditors.

Madame de Trémouille, as she was then called, had lived previously in Ghent under the name of Scholl, and prior to that in Berlin under that of Frank. She remained in London until forced by creditors to move on, but only to reappear in Paris. Here it was as the Princess Volodmer that she set up house, with a numerous suite, among which were two German Barons. The Barons, needless to relate, were as enigmatical as the Princess, one of whom on being arrested for debt proved to be Van Toers, the prodigal son of the Dutchman.

While at Venice she persuaded the Sultan of Turkey to support her claim to the throne and act-

ually to embark her in one of his ships with all her suite for Constantinople, but owing to a storm the vessel was obliged to take refuge in the harbor of Ragusa. Here they landed, and accommodation was provided for her by the French Consul placing his house at her disposal. While under his roof she addressed a letter to Count Alexis Orlov, then with the fleet at Leghorn, enclosing a copy of the Empress Elizabeth's will and claiming her right the Russian throne; which document she entrusted to Mr. Wortley Montagu to deliver. The Count forwarded the letter straight to Catherine, who sent immediate instructions to secure her person at all risks, and if the authorities of the town refused to give her up, to bombard it at once. This gives color to the idea that there was some sort of foundation to her claim. * * *

Although Catherine failed to elicit her real identity during her life, some discovery must have been made after her death, for a curious fact came to light some years later. The French Minister at St. Petersburg had a demand put before him by a French subject for a sum of fifty-two thousand livres, being a debt of the Princess Volodmer during her stay in Paris in 1772. The Marquis de Verac, never having heard of such a person, proceeded to make inquiries. These were abruptly stopped: the Princess, he was informed, was dead, and all her debts had been paid, but if the claim in question was sent in a settlement would be made. On reviewing the whole evidence it would appear that the unfortunate woman was herself unaware of the identity of her parents: in her youth she had been taken from place to place, her high birth spoken of in ambiguous terms, and finally had received the will of the Empress Elizabeth anonymously during her stay at Mannheim. But whether she was of royal birth or not, it was manifestly necessary for Catherine, who had plumped herself upon the throne, to silence any possible pretensions.

A BURIED CITY AND AN ANCIENT CHURCH.—The ancient capital of Britain, we are told, was Verulamium. It stood a few score yards west of St. Alban's Abbey. Not a stone of it remains upon another, but one may readily trace its site by the mounds of heaving turf that lie scattered round. The worms and moles must have been busy here for over a thousand years, for the ruins are buried several feet deep beneath the sward. That was an instructive experiment of Darwin's when he had several acres of grass land covered with a thick layer of chalk. He lived to see that stratum of chalk nine or ten inches deep beneath the surface—that was the work of the worms. The city was a mile in length and three-fourths of a mile in width. It was laid out in a series of oblong plots, through which ran the great Roman road, still known as "Watling Street." On the southern side was the King's Fishpond, a lake fed by the pretty little stream, the "Ver," still bright and sparkling, and dimpled in spring by the rising trout. An ancient British fortification is supposed to have occupied the site, and this was taken in Caesar's first invasion (B. C. 55). After a century's absence the Romans returned and commenced building the stately Verulamium, with its palaces, forum, and amphitheatres. In A. D. 344 became the capital. Then, only a few years afterwards, came a terrible revenge, the city was sacked and burned by Boadicea, and not a soul of the seventy thousand inhabitants escaped. Excavations from time to time have resulted in the discovery of Roman pavements, coins, and pottery, and abundant traces of its early Roman occupation. One may gather some ideas as to the importance of St. Alban, centuries ago, from a glance at the Old Summer Yard. All that is left of the monastery is the gateway, the first floor of which is used as the grammar school, perhaps the oldest in the kingdom (1095). There must have been a busy scene in front of it when crowded with wagons, pack horses, and mules bringing in the produce of the land from the country round—the venison and game, the meat, corn, wine, and oil. For the Abbot entertained many guests, kings, princes, and noblemen among them, and a host of retainers. Beyond the ruins Verulamium is the ancient church of St. Michael's, in which may be seen a monument to Lord Bacon, "Baron of Verulam," "who after all Natural Wisdom and Secrets of Life he had unfolded, Nature's law fulfilled. Let compound be dissolved. In the year of Our Lord, 1626, of his age 66." The venerable Abbey of St. Alban's occupied a commanding site close by. It was founded by Lanfranc in 1077, and opened eleven years after for public worship. The material of the Abbey consists largely of that found in the ruins of Verulamium. As may be noticed, Roman tiles enter largely into the construction, besides sandstone and flint. One may observe, here and there, in the older garden walls, similar material employed. Verulamium was an inexhaustible quarry. St. Alban's is thought to be the oldest existing Abbey.

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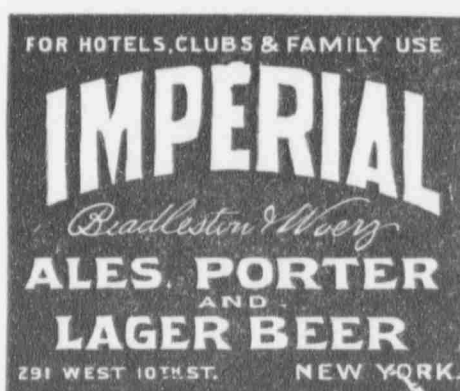
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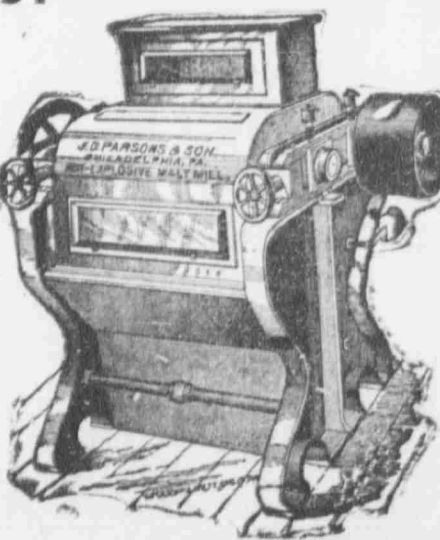
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